



The Train to Crystal City: FDR's Secret Prisoner Exchange Program and America's Only Family Internment Camp during World War II by Jan Jarboe Russell.

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Despite its subtitle, journalist¹ Jan Russell's book concerns much more than one World War II family internment camp. It might better have been titled "The Train *from* Crystal City," given her concentration on the individuals whose lives became strangely interwoven as nations tried to sort out enemy aliens and citizen prisoners of war through secret exchanges. The book is an account of wartime displacement and loss among groups rarely discussed together: (a) Japanese-Americans excluded from the West Coast and Japanese nationals picked up by the FBI and interned by the Department of Justice, (b) Japanese Latin Americans deported to the United States to be exchanged for American POWs in Japan, (c) German nationals interned by the Department of Justice and their family members who voluntarily joined them, and (d) Jews seeking release from German concentration camps. Russell also describes the experience of Earl G. Harrison, who later shaped postwar policies for the treatment of displaced persons.

Though Crystal City itself is the book's focal point, the author follows some key families after they left the camp, including those who benefited from the prisoner exchanges with the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. Particularly compelling is Russell's reconstruction of the chance encounters and parallel stories of two women who realize their lives were connected in ways they never understood—a Jew born in Denmark, whose father had obtained falsified passports for Ecuador and was exchanged for a German American woman whose father and his family had been deported to Germany. Sadly, some exchanges of prisoners between the United States, Japan, and Germany came too late to save their lives, while others found themselves in unexpected peril in war-ravaged countries at the end of the war. The personal narratives Russell collects here constitute a profound commentary on the complexities and contradictions faced by people who did not meet the artificial criteria of citizenship in a context of global migrations and wartime displacements.

The book begins with a detailed introduction to the history of Crystal City, its purpose, and the main groups detained there during the war, including Japanese and German nationals who were reunited with their families, and Latin American Japanese deported to the United States.² Russell provides insights into the adaptation of prewar prison facilities and networks of government officials to wartime circumstances.

The middle of the book reviews the daily operations of the camp and the relations and conflicts between and within ethnic groups. Especially poignant are the stories of American citizen children of alien parents who struggled to maintain a sense of normalcy despite their incarceration and the prospect of deportation and "repatriation" to a country they had never known.

1. She has written for, among others, the *New York Times*, the *San Antonio Express-News*, and *Slate*, and is a contributing editor for *Texas Monthly*. Her previous books include *Lady Bird: A Biography of Mrs. Johnson* (NY: Scribner, 1999) and (as editor) *They Lived to Tell the Tale: True Stories of Modern Adventure from the Legendary Explorers Club* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Pr, 2008).

2. Though mentioned only in passing, some Italians were detained there as well.

The last third of the book centers on families deported to Japan and Germany. Readers learn that Germany exchanged American POWs and some Jews for repatriated Germans and their German American children.

Russell's vivid journalistic prose style makes material more typical of dry academic histories readily accessible to a broader audience. Consider, for example, the following passage on the desperate state of one family trying to make its way from the official point of exchange at the German border to reunite with relatives:

The complex endgame of the war was in play. In the early days of February, as Ingrid and her family trudged through the snow in Germany, they were invisible casualties of much larger forces. Given the official secrecy of the government's exchange program, few in America knew anything of the plight of families such as the Eiserlohs. In the face of the magnitude of the loss of American lives during the war against Japan and Germany, it is unlikely many would have cared. (212)

Russell has the knack of making readers care deeply about the plight of individuals and families, while linking their stories to the overarching themes of her narrative.

Many scholars have noted that we need to know more about what happens to repatriated and other people after their internment experiences. This book is a fine addition to the literature on that subject;³ it is especially valuable because so little has been written on Crystal City or American prisoner exchanges with Japan or Germany. Russell has managed to blend many disparate stories in a salutary work on the expansive US program of internment during the Second World War.⁴

As a book by a journalist aimed at a popular audience, *The Train to Crystal City* sometimes fails to meet the standards of a rigorous academic history. For instance, Russell repeats a common misunderstanding of President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 (*not* 9006): it did not create military zones, set the boundaries of exclusion, or specifically designate Japanese Americans for removal. It only authorized the military to begin to take steps in the process. Like many others, the author also misrepresents the all-Nisei 442nd Combat Team as a volunteer unit. It was that at its formation in 1943, but, after suffering heavy casualties in summer 1943, the unit was replenished with draftees from the camps. Russell confuses the number of Japanese Americans initially detained in War Relocation Authority Centers (110,000) with the total number detained (120,000), including those at Department of Justice centers, voluntary internment cases, and even babies born in camps during the war. She also sometimes uses non-standard terminology; those who actually lived in the austere family barracks in Topaz would not have called them "bungalows."

Though professional historians may be impatient with the granularity of Russell's narrative style, details like the weather on a particular day, the feeling of being on a train, or the atmosphere of the massive swimming pool at Crystal City bring to life the scenes she describes. For example, setting the scene of the death by drowning of two Japanese Peruvian girls, she writes that

The pool was a refuge, a place where fear, boredom, and anger were washed away. The water shimmered; people were energized. When birds flew over the heads of the swimmers some thought of it as a kind of blessing. The Germans, Japanese, Italians, and Latin Americans from many different countries all spoke in their own languages. The Germans and Japanese had separate bathhouses. Like the image from a crystal, the pool reflected many histories and perspectives. All that changed on the afternoon of August

3. Including, notably, Tetsuden Kashima, *Judgment without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment during World War II* (Seattle: U Washington Pr, 2004), and Eileen Tamura, *In Defense of Justice: Joseph Kurihara and the Japanese American Struggle for Equality* (Urbana: U Illinois Pr, 2013).

4. Cf. Anna Pegler-Gordon, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2009), which analyzes three different points of immigration—Angel Island, Ellis Island, and the El Paso border station—in order to tell a more complete story of immigration.

15, 1944, because on that day ... thirteen-year-old Sachiko Taname and eleven-year-old Aiko Oyokawa [drowned]. (178)

Elsewhere, we feel a family's despair when a Jewish father dies on the train carrying them from Bergen-Belsen to an exchange point and beyond it to freedom. In one of the inhuman tragedies of war, his family had to unceremoniously leave his body behind on a bench at a train station as they continued on their journey.

Today, the United Nations reports that the numbers of persons displaced by war and persecution are historically high.⁵ Part of the human cost of war is its effect on families that are separated and uprooted from their homes. Jan Jarboe Russell's *The Train to Crystal City*, despite minor flaws, succeeds in telling their stories with a compassion and an evocative detail that would be out of place in a more scholarly study.

5. UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "Worldwide Displacement Hits All-Time High as War and Persecution Increase" (18 June 2015) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1601.htm.